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THE LETTERS OF GRAY, WALPOLE AND COWPER

No one can deny that the letters are often — perhaps always — the most authentic part of biography and history. They are the most sincere and spontaneous written opinions of men concerning the events and personalities of their times. This it is that has made the letters of the past ages so interesting and valuable to us. The eighteenth century was the Golden Age of English letter-writing. Three writers of the period achieved supreme distinction in this form of literature — Thomas Gray, Horace Walpole, and William Cowper.

It is difficult to say which was the greater. In the case of Walpole, we are captivated by the material, the brilliancy of style, and the spontaneity of utterance; Gray's letters are more natural and more manly, and characterized by a precision of style which came of severe scholarly training; in Cowper we are attracted by the man and his manner. There is little in common between these three men who lived in the same age. Cowper, who lived in retirement in a quiet English village, writes about the unceasing trivialities of country life with such a mixture of grace, vivacity, tenderness, and good sense, that he puts the breath of life into the most commonplace things. Walpole, who lived amid the brilliant artificialities of Strawberry Hill, conversant with intrigues and scandals of the day, endowed with one of the keenest intellects of his time, holds men with the magic of his personality. Through the pages of Gray's letters breathes the spirit of the rising romantic movement.

Horace Walpole has often been called "The Prince of Letter-writers." It is certain that he appeals to a wider circle of readers. He saw more of life, and was naturally more brilliant and catholic than his compeers. As a member of Parliament, a frequent traveller, an indefatigable playgoer, a social light of London, a miscellaneous collector, a dilettante in art and literature, he stands in strong contrast to the scholarly Gray and the retiring Cowper. So it happens that the letters of Walpole touch various phases of life. He writes with extraordinary force about the public events of his time, and the historical value of his letters is priceless. A great part, however, are

devoted merely to the gossip and scandal of the day. Whatever the subject, his style is spontaneous and brilliant, characterized by copiousness in exquisite detail and perpetual freshness of phrase. The good humor, the gaiety, the delicate satire, the exquisitely felicitous turns of expression, the inimitable way he tells a story — make Walpole's letters a delightful treasurehouse.

Thomas Gray belongs in spirit to the nineteenth century. In his letters we find that love for nature which was the characteristic of the rising romantic movement. Common enough it seems to us, but the classic eighteenth century had no more love for wild and striking scenery than for Gothic architecture or romantic poetry. Gray wrote on a variety of subjects, but he did nothing finer than his descriptions of travels in Italy and his journey in the English lake country. Here is a glimpse of Italy — merely a fleeting picture — but it expresses volumes: "I am now going to the window, to tell you it is the most beautiful of Italian nights. There is a moon! There are stars for you! Do you not hear the fountains? Do you not smell the orange flowers? That building yonder is the Convent of St. Isidore, and that eminence with the cypress trees and the firs upon it, the top of Mount Quirinal."

There is a certain quality in Gray's style that springs from his sensible and genuine character; but this style was strengthened and developed by severe and retiring study. Most of his subjects are common and light enough in themselves — his daily round of petty duties, his melancholy, politics, criticisms of current literature, life at Cambridge, his "dab of musick and prints," Gothic architecture, nature, and the weather. It is his graphic, simple and musical style that gives them charm. This style was not innate and spontaneous, like that of Walpole. It was the result of long and careful training. He was one of the most learned men in Europe — thoroughly acquainted with scientific research, familiar with universal history, archæology, the classics, criticism, metaphysics, morals, politics, travels, printing, and the fine arts. Gray's style has all the charm of Walpole's, and is simple and genuine.

Gray's appreciation of nature, his lovable character, his simplicity, his concise and perspicuous style — in short, his sym-

pathy with ideals of the present age — give his letters a peculiar interest for present-day readers. The twentieth century has little respect for the artificialities of eighteenth century literature — even when it is as sparkling and amusing as the letters of Walpole. It is equally true that we care less for the homely, common things, such as Cowper vivified with an unapproachable charm. Gray had none of the affected or unheeding spirit of his unromantic age when he wrote this picture of an English landscape: “The bosom of the mountains, spreading here into a broad basin; discovers in the midst Grasmere-water; its margin is hollowed into two small bays, with bold eminences, some of rock, some of soft turf, that half conceal and vary the form of the little lake they command; from the shore, a lone promontory pushes itself far into the water, and on it stands a white village, with the parish church rising in the midst of it; hanging inclosures, corn-fields, and meadows green as an emerald, with their trees and hedges, and cattle, fill up the whole space from the edge of the water; and just opposite to you is a large farmhouse at the bottom of a steep, smooth lawn, embosomed in old woods, which climb half-way up the mountain’s side, and discover above them a broken line of crags that crown the scene. Not a single red tile, no glaring gentleman’s house, or garden-walls, break in upon the repose of this little, unsuspected paradise; but all is space, rusticity, and happy poverty, in its neatest, most becoming attire.” Every word here seems intended to show off the scene rather than the writer. His touch is sure, and his taste faultless. Every idea is expressed with perfect naturalness and singular felicity.

Cowper is distinguished by the saving grace of appreciating common things. He compels our personal interest, evokes our sympathies, and arouses a wish to have known him in everyday life. Moreover, we see in Cowper the sterling, Anglo-Saxon solidity that means so much to English-speaking men. For this reason alone Cowper’s letters demand a high place in English literature. But he had other qualities — grace, vivacity, tenderness, and common sense. Unlike Gray and Walpole, what he writes is manifestly unstudied, for this reason he makes the impression of being more sincere. Cowper interests us in

his characters and reveals them plainly. Modern readers do not care to learn the fleeting names which Walpole mentions as he retails the chit-chat of the town. Cowper enlists our sympathy in his humble characters — William Wilson, the barber and wig-maker; Daniel Raban, baker and hero of the village pump; 'Kitch,' the gardener, who, on great occasions, donned the smart blue coat discarded by his master. These village characters and trifling aspects of nature were the material for letters as fascinating as any of the brilliant tid-bits from Strawberry Hill. The excuse of a slack correspondent — that he has nothing to write about — would fail him from very shame, if he would apply himself to the letters of Cowper, and learn from them how much may be made out of so little.

Next to his appreciation of common things stands Cowper's sympathy for others. Through his whole life he was an affectionate and lovable person, full of that exquisite sensibility that shrinks from all contact with the world. Full of freedom and innocent raillery, with an imagination at once natural and charming, he was one of those characters to whom women devote themselves with maternal tenderness. His friendships with Theodora Cowper, Mary Unwin, Lady Hesketh, and Lady Austen, are notable for their depth and sincerity.

All of Cowper's tastes were limited. He never read fiction, philosophy or poetry. Rarely going outside of the little village of Olney, yet curious to learn about foreign countries, he read widely in books of travel. He hated the artificiality of his times, and loved simplicity. He appreciated the clear-cut, perspicuous style of Swift, Addison and Pope; and he greatly admired the sturdy sense and forcible expression of Doctor Johnson. Cowper's other tastes were as narrowly limited as his reading. He knew practically nothing of the rising romantic movement, of which Gray was the leading English spirit at that period. He cared not at all for the antiquities of his neighborhood or the treasures of art. He was in tune, apart from his simplicity, with the prosaic, unromantic eighteenth century.

We have said little about the genial and playful humor of Cowper. Yet, given as he was to staid meditation and frequent melancholy, Cowper's humorous descriptions equal those of Wal-

pole, who made the invention of brilliant and witty sayings the chief business of his life. His description of a candidate's visit to his house in 1784 is perhaps the best known of all his letters; and it may be quoted as perhaps the finest example of his quiet humor and graceful style: "Candidates are creatures not very susceptible of affronts, and would rather, I suppose, climb in at a window than be absolutely excluded. In a minute the yard, the kitchen, and the parlour were filled. Mr. Grenville, advancing toward me, shook me by the hand with a degree of cordiality that was extremely seducing. As soon as he, and as many more as could find chairs, were seated, he began to open the intent of his visit. I told him I had no vote, for which he readily gave me credit. I assured him I had no influence, which he was not equally inclined to believe, and less, no doubt, because Mr. Ashburner, the draper, addressing himself to me at this moment, informed me that I had a great deal. Supposing that I could not be possessed of such a treasure without knowing it, I ventured to confirm my first assertion by saying that if I had any I was utterly at a loss to imagine where it could be, or wherein it consisted. Thus ended the conference. Mr. Grenville squeezed me by the hand again, kissed the ladies, and withdrew. He kissed likewise the maid in the kitchen, and seemed upon the whole a most loving, kissing, kind-hearted gentleman. He is very young, genteel, and handsome. He has a pair of very good eyes in his head, which, not being sufficient as it should seem for the many nice and difficult purposes of a senator, he has a third also, which he wore suspended by a ribbon from his buttonhole. The boys halloo'd, the dogs barked; the hero, with his long train of obsequious followers, withdrew."

Each appeals in a supreme way to his own peculiar audience. The charm which is inherent in Walpole's letters is one for which the English language has no native turn. *Elles sont piquantes*, to the highest degree, as one writer says. For consummate grace, concise expression, and precision of style, Gray is unexcelled. Cowper is truly Anglo-Saxon in his appreciation of homely things, in moral power, and unstudied natural style.

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